



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: December 18, 2006

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner
Paul Trudeau, Preservation Administrator

Re: D-1100: 54 Larchwood Drive

An application to demolish the gambrel roof at 54 Larchwood Drive and to construct a new gable roof, in conjunction with a remodeling project that will change the footprint and character of the house, was received on December 12, 2006. The applicant was notified of an initial determination of significance, and a public hearing was scheduled for January 4, 2007.

Site

The structure is located on the west side of Larchwood Drive, part of the Larchwood subdivision and accessed by Fresh Pond Parkway and Huron Avenue in the southwest corner of Old Cambridge (see attached assessor's map). The structure is a two-story, Dutch Colonial Revival wood-framed dwelling on a concrete foundation. A curb cut, driveway, and two-car garage are located on the north side of the house.

The structure is sited on an 18,617 square-foot lot (Map 251/Parcel 134) in a Residence A-2 zone. The zone permits an FAR of .50 and has a height limit of 35 feet. The house has wide side-yard setbacks, and moderate front and rear setbacks, with the rear yard sloping down towards Aberdeen Avenue. Neighboring properties include 44 Larchwood Drive, a Georgian Revival-inspired double-gable, wood-framed building, and 60 Larchwood Drive, a large Dutch Colonial Revival building with a gambrel roof.

Architectural Description

The house at 54 Larchwood Drive was constructed in 1919. It is a two-story, three-bay Dutch Colonial Revival structure with an asphalt-shingled gambrel roof, wood clapboards, and a concrete foundation. It has a rear ell, enclosed side porch, and a detached two-car garage. The windows have wood double-hung sash with a variety of light configurations, including eight-over-eight, nine-over-nine, and twelve-over-twelve.

The front façade is dominated by a Classical-inspired portico, complete with wide, round columns, a flat roof, paneled door, and hooded doorway with dentils and narrow, paired pilasters. A triple window flanks the portico to the left. A full shed dormer with two double windows runs across the second floor of the house. The right side double window appears to have been reduced, with a pair of molded panels replacing the bottom half. An enclosed porch with a flat roof and a wide cornice projects from the west wall of the house. The porch was added in 1922. The right (east) elevation has a disproportionate window arrangement, including a tall, rounded-arch window, and a side entrance with a bracketed hood. A rear ell, extended by 10 feet in 1972, comes off the back wall of the house. The detached garage, added to the site in 1921, has a flat roof, wide cornice, eave overhang, and engaged end columns.



54 Larchwood Drive, December 2006



54 Larchwood Drive, front porch detail

Current Condition

The current condition of the house appears to be good. The greatest existing threat is water damage and paint failure due to improper maintenance. Rusted air conditioner window units have caused damage to window sills and casings. Architectural details have been well-maintained, and the wide wood clapboards are serviceable. The asphalt roof shingles look to be in fair shape and the double-hung sash units appear operable. The detached garage shows a great deal of deferred maintenance, including paint failure and rust seepage from the flat roof (likely from metal flashing). Overall, the house appears to be structurally sound. A permit was pulled in October of 2006 for extensive renovations to the interior of the building.

The proposal would significantly alter the building's character. The gambrel roof will be rebuilt as a side gable roof, which will raise the building height just under one foot. The shed dormer will be replaced by a series of gables, as part of an addition to the building that will enlarge the footprint and add a new portico. Other changes to the front façade will include a rounded-arch window and roof balustrade on the existing portico. The new portico will wrap around to the left (west) façade, which will also feature a second-story central porch with a balustrade and double doors.



54 Larchwood Drive, December 2006

History

The house at 54 Larchwood Drive was built in an early 20th-century garden subdivision called Larchwood, which was bounded by Brattle Street, Larch Road, Fresh Pond Parkway, and Huron Avenue. The Larchwood subdivision was managed by Forris W. Norris' real estate company and was designed by the landscape architecture firm of Pray, Hubbard & White. Norris purchased the 23-acre estate of John Chipman Gray, shortly after Gray's death in 1915. The estate was the last large property on Brattle Street to be subdivided for development. The Gray estate consisted of a large mansion, The Larches, and its gardens. When the estate was sold, the Gray family moved The Larches and its fence from Brattle Street to 22 Larch Road. They also relocated the Ebenezer

Wyeth farmhouse (1751) to 36 Larch Road. The farmhouse had been serving as the ell to the larger family mansion. These two properties were exempted from the strict setback restrictions that would be placed on new houses constructed in the subdivision.

The partnership of Pray, Hubbard & White was a successful landscape architecture design team from 1906-1918. Both James Sturgis Pray and Henry Vincent Hubbard studied at Harvard and worked in the Olmsted office. At the instruction of Norris, the landscape architects retained as many of the trees from the Gray estate as possible. The resulting plan consisted of 101 house lots of various shapes and sizes situated on curving, tree-lined streets (see attached subdivision plan). Fresh Pond Lane was completely redesigned and two new streets were designed as part of Larchwood: Meadow Way and Larchwood Drive. Norris restricted the development to single-family dwellings, and he established specific development guidelines regarding setbacks, minimum construction costs, and design review.

A few houses were constructed in the Larchwood subdivision prior to the start of World War I, but the majority were constructed during the 1920s. Georgian Revival is the predominant style in the neighborhood, but other revival styles popular in the 1920s can also be found.

Residents of 54 Larchwood Drive have included Frank W. Marvin, a treasurer, Irving Walker, a physician, Seymour Edgerton, an attorney, and Barrington Moore, a renowned sociologist, author, and Harvard University lecturer who passed away last year at the age of 92.

Significance and Recommendation

The house at 54 Larchwood Drive is significant as contributing resource in the meticulously planned Larchwood subdivision, which was designed to incorporate wide, meandering streets, spacious lots, open views, and architectural quality. The building is an exemplary example of the Dutch Colonial Revival style that is found in the neighborhood. The house's relationship to the planned subdivision, F. W. Norris, and landscape architects Pray, Hubbard & White reinforces the house's associations to the broad architectural history of the City. It is the staff recommendation that the structure be found significant for the above-mentioned reasons.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, ISD
Albert Pacheco